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ABSTRACT

Novels intended for adolescent readers have the following qualities in common: a tone that is implied by the diction and the syntax; themes that relate to adolescent concerns such as the search for status and identity, breaking family ties, and handling sex; a predilection to teach through example or to convey a message; and an atmosphere of realism that presents life as it is, through the use of facts and details in setting, characters, and plot. Although some current teenage novels have moved from realism to fantasy or science fiction, the narrative aspects of all adolescent novels fulfil an important function in the reading development of young people. (MAI)

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G.R. Carlsen
IRA Speech

CRITERIA FOR EXCELLENCE IN ADOLESCENT LITERATURE

A very long time ago the first teen-age book to which I lost my heart was T Model Tommy by Stephen Meader. This came about because as a young teacher I was having my first experience in class with a boy whose like I would meet over and over in subsequent years. He was that eager-to-please young'un who always participated in discussions and was deeply appreciative of my endeavors. I immediately attributed such perceptiveness to great intelligence. But when I gave tests he always came out at the bottom of the class. It took me a number of years to recognize the classic over achiever.

My young student had never been able to get much interested in reading. So the two of us launched an individualized program. I would give him books to read that would "help" him improve himself. What the two of us meant by "improve" was that these would help him get ready for college. I was convinced that he was capable. He just hadn't been given things that would really excite him intellectually. Get the picture? This was a cooperative young man who was probably a sucker for all kinds of self help ads. A kind of friendly puppy dog, but not really very bright. So we tried Crime and Punishment, and Of Human Bondage and Lord Jim and Great Expectations and The Jungle. In comparison with the books taught at the period, these were pretty red hot innovations and ought to grab a bright young mind.

So here was this mild mannered, slight young man with sandy hair, bright eyed, who desperately wanted to please me. But he relunctantly admitted with book after book that somehow he just couldn't quite get into it. Maybe later on he would try it again.

I no longer remember how he got hold of T Model Tommy. It wasn't a new

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book...it had already been around long enough to be issued in class room sets and sold largely in the vocational high schools of those days. Wow, the book hit my young student with a bolt of lightning. It was the most amazing story that had ever been written. It showed him how effort could pay off if you just worked hard enough. It was the kind of book on which he could model his own life. It scorned things like W.P.A. and the C.C.C. to solve problems. Tommy certainly didn't need them and was proud that he didn't depend on them. Now that I think of it, the book had a lot of resemblances to the Waltons.

What was this book like that so engulfed my 17 year old reader? I suspect most of you have never heard of it or of the other twenty or so books that Stephen Meader turned out during the 30's, the 40's and the 50's.

Tommy, the son of a poor widow, gets the town council to let him saw up the dead trees along the parkways to sell as firewood. With this pittance he is able to buy a battered old truck which he, step by step puts back together. His first job is hauling old furniture for an antique dealer. Eventually he gets into hauling coal and he keeps reinvesting his profits and after a year or so can buy a second truck. Excitement is added because he runs into high jackers on the road, is kidnapped, escapes and ultimately brings the gang to justice. At the end of the story he is running a prosperous trucking business and has attracted the attention of the girl he had thought was out of reach.

On the surface, it is the old rags-to-riches-through-virtue-and-hard-work pattern of story. Even old stereotypes are present: The hero has the good old Anglo-Saxon name of Tom Ballard while the villain is Hooch Lazzo. Either Hooch or one of his henchmen is an albino whose pale skin and red rimmed eyes are made to seem pretty repulsive.

But the great virtue of the book was its realism. It is almost a manual of how to get a beat up car running. Tom's monetary affairs are minutely detailed. His mother only very reluctantly lets him borrow her nest egg to get his business started. So except for the high jackers the book is intensely real. And on the old Gray-Leary readability formula, it tested out at about third grade level of difficulty, but in no way did it seem concocted, written down especially for the disabled high school reader. I am sure that a conscious control of vocabulary and structures never entered Meader's mind when he wrote the book.

And to my student it was sheer dynamite. He could read it. It satisfied his need for narration. It was wish gratifying and it affirmed his faith in the work ethic. He had had a real literary experience. He asked the inevitable question: do you have some more books as good as this one? Yes, we had quite a lot of them even at this time, though they were scorned by most literate English teachers who felt that we should stick to the literary heritage.

T. Model Tommy came out of the literary caldron in which the teen-age book has been brewed. It emerges as a new literary genre. Its first ingredient is an implied reader who is an adolescent.

Critics have long been aware that a piece of literature has a persona, a voice, a personality who is telling the story. Until the twentieth century we called this the author. Was it T.S. Elliot who showed us that the narrator, even in third person presentations, is not really the author, but a personality the author has created for the purposes of this narrative? But only fairly recently so far as I know, have critics started to see that just as surely as there is a story teller, within a story, so too there is a reader within the story. Most writers know this. They will frankly admit who are the

readers of their books (I write for upper elementary, for example) but some stubbornly deny that they have any reader in mind. They write they say for "self expression," or "because there was a story that needed to be told." But such statements are highly suspect. In the writer's subconscience the implied reader is always there. That reader structures the narrative as much as does the implied narrator. He is found in the style, the content, the structure of the book. You can't miss the implied reader of most of Updike's books: the troubled weary intellectual in mid life.

We all can spot instinctively when the implied reader is a five year old or a ten year old. We know pretty surely whether the reader will be male or female. Critics even say that the nineteenth century English novel was obviously written for the rising middle class, homogenized British reader.

So the books like T. Model Tommy and the whole genre that we call adolescent books have an implied teen-age reader. A few children read them, but it is almost impossible to conceive of any adult's reading them. Teens will read some books with an adult implied reader, but almost never will they read those with a child. We read books ahead of us but not those behind us.

How does a book reveal its implied reader. Let's look at the first paragraph of The Pigman.

> Now, I don't like school, which you might say is one of the factors that got us involved with this old guy we nicknamed the Pigman. Actually, I hate school, but then again most of the time I hate everything.

You know immediately who the reader is. You know by the diction. You know by the syntax. You know by the tone, and you can even surmise by the content. If I were just an adult reader, not interested in teen-agers, I certainly

would never read much beyond that first paragraph. I am not in the group of implied readers. It is almost like the taverns in Iowa City. Nothing says I can't frequent them, but a subtle something says not to. Most are for the young. Some for gays, some for the fraternity/sorority crowd, some for writer's workshop people. Taverns have an implied patron and I have never found one for aging university professors.

Theme is a second ingredient of this genre of writing of which T. Model Tommy was an example. Themes tie into that troubled time of life we call the adolescent years. These include the search for status, the search for identity, establishing relations with the opposite sex, breaking the family stranglehold, finding a vocation, handling sex--you know the whole list of such things. There also are the themes that are peculiar to individual historical periods. Tommy was a depression book and the real problem, as in the Waltons, was finding a little bit of money and discovering some sort of vocation. Vocational books were birthed at this period (Remember the old Sue Barton series?) and continued in popularity for the next twenty years. They are almost all gone now. Recently we have passed through periods of books about drugs, racial conflicts, the draft, communes, Viet Nam, difficulties of getting into college, parental divorce, adoption, alcoholism, women's liberation. The subject of the moment seems to be first sex experiences. These are so prevalent that when Ursula LeGuin wrote Very Far Away form Anywhere Else in which there is a romantic attachment between 17 year olds without copulation, the book is startling...almost unbelievable.

A third ingredient of the teen-age book that was apparent in Tommy is its predilection to teach...not didactically (we would never stand for that)

but to teach through example...through showing. One can almost detect the writer behind the persona of a teen-age book...an author who has the instincts of the evangelist. Tommy was preaching the work ethic and self sufficiency. It seemed to say "Look, you young people, you can do it. You can find ways of earning money and moving ahead without depending on doles from the government." Let's take Judy Blume's Forever. It is obvious that Blume has a "message" she wants to get across. It is something like "Sex is fun. Be liberated, Don't worry, Sex is not something on which you build a real relationship."

I suspect that it is the message behind the teen-age book that is the give away about the implied reader. Books with adult implied readers have themes, moral and ethical dilemmas but they seldom "teach." It is interesting that in the two teen-age books written themselves by teen-agers the didactic quality is missing. I refer to Seventeenth Summer and The Outsiders. As Hinton has "Grown up" and continued writing, one is more and more conscious of a message in her later books.

Another ingredient of this genre of literature is its tradition of realism. Realism has been the dominant literary mode of all prose fiction for the last two hundred years. It rose with the development of the novel in the 18th century and has continued almost unbroken in the great works of the nineteenth and 20th centuries. Almost all have dealt with "real" people in "real" setting. Often the settings are both geographically and historically real (Dicken's, London, or Hardy's Egdon Heath or Lewis' Mainstreet.) The teen-age book developed to present teen-age life as it really is. Hinton has said that as a teen-ager, she could find no book that were like the life she was living. So she had to write one for herself. At meetings such as this, we praise the

books that seem to get closer and closer to the real truth about teen-agers. So writers tell about wet dreams, and erections, and menstration, and homosexuality in the attempt to be realistic. In our pursuit of realism it is surprising that there are not more underarm odors and descriptions of defecation.

I lost my heart to T. Model Tommy partially because it was so real. We find out how much Tommy had to pay for spark plugs, where he found a rebuilt battery, how he got four used tires. The story was both possible and probable. In my college classes today the principal argument about teen-age books is over their reality. Do or do not, would or would not people really behave as they do in the story. My students always damn by saying the character was not rounded or realistic.

So the realistic tradition dominates the teen-age book so much so that I have come to feel that great numbers of our present crop are really case studies rather than real narratives. Some like Run Shelley Run actually use case study notes to head each chapter. Others are transcriptions of things told to a lawyer, or a psychiatrist. While these books are still narratives in the sense that a court record is a narrative, they really have very little plot in the sense of a Kidnapped, or a Julius Caesar, or a First Blood.

Some critics surmise that realism as a literary mode is waning. It has gone about as far as it can go. It has become repetitious and has literally worn out. They postulate that the greatest degree of creative sparkle in literature today lies in the broad amorphous area of fantasy, science fiction, romance. Look at the acclaim amoung the young for Star Trek, Star Wars, and

Close Encounters of the Third Kind. Consider the literary success of Watership Down or of Lord of the Rings. The Silmarillion has been near the top of the best seller list for weeks and weeks.

This kind of literature leaves the here and now and creates a whole different world. Characters tend to be Everyman and Everywoman and are not particularized. The setting becomes the most important element. We as readers are interested in seeing how Everyperson gets along in this world. And such unreal worlds and people, in some strange way, meet our own in our minds. Let's take a small example from LeGuin's The Left Hand of Darkness. The inhabitants on Winter are androgynous. They are sexually active only once a month. At that time either member of a pair may develop the proper sex organs to become the father or mother of a child. Thus in this society there are no male or female characteristics and no male or female roles. Furthermore, except in the period of "kemmer" there are no sexual drives or thoughts. So the book raises in the reader's mind, whole speculations about our bi-sexual socity and its ramifications in our behavior and our institutions.

Some of the most exciting and provocative of recent books for teens are those that break the stranglehold of realism: Slakes Limbo with its unreal-real life in a New York subway, House of Stairs where 16 year-old orphans are cast into an endless space filled with stairs, the science fiction of someone like Lawrence Yep (Seademons is his newest). Even The Chocolate War and I Am the Cheese create a universe that is not quite real. It is this quality that perhaps so horrifies some readers who are imprinted with realism as their literary criterion.

I confess to having trouble with M.E. Kerr's books because they so often seem to hang between realism and fantasy. I can't really believe realistically

in that Virginia school or in Miss Blue who teaches there, but I can't quite accept it either as an imaginary place such as I might meet by stepping through the looking glass. I have trouble too with that first sentence of her I'll Love You When You're Like Me.

> One warm night in May, in the back of the hearse, while I was whispering "I love you, I love you," into Lauralie Rabinowitz' soft black hair, she said, "Stop right there, Wally! There are three reasons why this can't go on any longer."

I am neither in the world of reality nor in the world of fantasy. But the popularity of her books may be just that she is moving in a new direction, away from that realism that has been the ear mark of the teen-age books throughout the century.

Be that as it may, the most important thing about the teen-age book is its function in the reading development of young people. It gets them to read when they are no longer children and not yet not quite adults. Generations of people have been turned off of reading by our forcing on them the mature landmarks of literature. People need narratives: teen-agers just as much as anybody else. They need narratives just as much as they need food or sex, or love. T. Model Tommy satisfied that need for my student all those years ago and it probably did more for developing his reading skills than a half a dozen classes in reading improvement could have accomplished.